

## **STAFF REPORT ON THE HOLY LAND**

### ***Introduction***

This report is based on a series of staff delegations to Israel and Palestine over the past two years. Throughout the course of these trips Committee staff met with government officials, religious leaders, and indigenous Christians in the area who are the living stones of the Christian narrative in the Holy Land.

### ***Summary***

The Christian community comprises less than two percent of the population, yet their institutions in the region are a vital part of the area's development, providing a safety net for the communities they serve. These institutions have been a beacon of tolerance and faith for people from all walks of life.

The Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities of the Holy Land have benefited in all respects from the valuable services provided by these institutions, receiving health, education and employment opportunities. Throughout the centuries, Christian institutions and their communities have been able, for the most part, to function, deliver services and fulfill their missions, in spite of turmoil.

The deepening economic and humanitarian crisis in the Palestinian Territories and the challenges associated with providing assistance to the Palestinian Authority has highlighted the important role these institutions fulfill. The vital services provided by institutions like Augusta Victoria Hospital and other similar institutions are critical to meeting the humanitarian needs of the Palestinian community.

This report outlines the fundamental challenges facing Christian institutions and their communities in the Holy land. It also highlights specific examples intended to describe how current political obstacles have altered the traditional role of these institutions. The resolution of these items is central to any attempt to find a lasting peace in the region.

### ***Negotiations Between the Holy See and the State of Israel***

Israel should be commended for its decision to return to negotiations with the Holy See in 2004. The Fundamental Agreement is an historic international treaty signed by the Holy See and Israel that established diplomatic relations between the two parties. The Agreement, signed by both parties in 1993 and entered into force in 1994 mandates a comprehensive agreement on all outstanding claims concerning economic and property matters within two years. Twelve years have passed since the treaty entered into force and still there is no comprehensive agreement. The agreement has not been ratified by the Israeli Knesset, making it impossible for church institutions to uphold the provisions of the agreement in Israeli courts. As a result, these institutions are vulnerable.

One example of this vulnerability is in Jerusalem at a hospice administered by Sisters of the organization, Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent De Paul. The hospice, which is famous for taking in Jewish refugees with “Concentration Camp Syndrome” after World War II and now serves over 350 people, has recently come under threat by new construction on its grounds. This new construction, which includes plans to build cinemas and entertainment centers on the grounds of the hospice violates the terms of a 125-year lease imposed by the State of Israel and signed by the Sisters concerning the appropriate use of the hospice’s property. The terms of the lease guarantee an access road for ambulances, patients and staff, visitors, and other traffic pertinent to the mission of the hospice, and that no new construction will block the sunlight to the hospice itself.

It has been reported that after taking these matters to the Israeli authorities, the Sisters were advised to sell the whole property to the business in charge of the construction, and vacate the premises. The Daughters have filed a lawsuit in an effort to force the Israeli authorities to comply with terms of the agreement. As of the writing of this letter, the case is unresolved. Had the Fundamental Agreement been ratified into Israeli law, the hospice would have benefited from its special protection. Lacking such protection, the Sisters have been forced to take matters into their own hands and their prospects for winning this battle are very much in doubt.

This case is an example of the extreme vulnerability of Christian institutions in the Holy Land and underscores the need for the United States to urgently extend its political support for the successful resolution of negotiations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. It is vital that there be a comprehensive settlement of all outstanding claims so the various agreements may be written into Israeli law, permitting the Church access to due process in Israel’s democratic government, allowing Christian institutions to focus on serving the communities they serve. A constructive approach would include the designation by the newly-elected Prime Minister of a member of his office to oversee the process of negotiations. This action should ensure that there is a team in place that is empowered and allocating sufficient time to negotiate an agreement.

### ***The Impact of the Barrier and Settlements on the Christian Narrative***

In a recent hearing on Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2005, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, Chairman of the Committee on International Policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, testified that Christians in the West Bank are feeling vulnerable. This feeling, he said, derives from the deepening divide between Muslim and Christian Palestinians, due in part to the route of the security barrier.

The routing of the security barrier and construction of settlements and their infrastructure through important Christian sites, contrary to the Roadmap, are irreversibly damaging the dwindling Christian community. Furthermore, these elements undermine President Bush’s vision of a negotiated two-state solution. After Israel occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank in 1967, Israel confiscated and expropriated thousands of dunams of land in the Bethlehem governorate. Today, the Bethlehem area is home to over twenty Israeli settlements and there are plans to build more. The settlements and the barrier completely encircle the Christian triangle of

Bethlehem, Beit Jala, and Beit Sahour (Shepherds' Field). This has created an untenable situation for the Bethlehemite community as housing and land shortages are drastically limiting the natural growth of the community. Furthermore, the security barrier, settlements, and bypass roads for Israeli settlers throughout the rest of the West Bank have led to an encroachment of rural Palestinian migrants into Christian urban centers, further adding to the problem of housing shortages. In several isolated incidents, this has resulted in takeovers of Bethlehem homes. Moreover, this construction physically obstructs the Bethlehem community from its spiritual, cultural, and economic lifeline in Jerusalem.

Elsewhere in the West Bank, Christians are facing similar problems. For example, there is the tragic case of the village of Aboud near Ramallah. Aboud is home to seven ancient churches, the oldest dating back to the third century. It is believed that Jesus passed through Aboud en route to Jerusalem from his childhood home in the Galilee. In Aboud, the route of the security barrier will cut off 1,100 acres of land, limit access to valuable water resources, and physically block Aboud from other surrounding villages. The Israeli Army has already uprooted thousands of olive trees in the village, resulting in a dire situation for farmers who rely on agriculture as the sustenance of their economy.

All parties should be held accountable to their international obligations and insist that Israel honor its pledge to stop settlement expansion. The United States should also press Israel to ensure that the security barrier being constructed is one for legitimate security needs, rather than as a pretext for annexing territory, and that genuine efforts are made to spare Palestinian communities – including the embattled Christian communities of the West Bank – disproportionate and unnecessary harm.

### ***The Importance of Maintaining the Multicultural Identity of Jerusalem***

There has been a decline of Christians in the Holy Land. The underlying causes of this reduction of the Christian community and the decline of its institutions are complex, and by no means do I wish to imply ill will either from Israel or the Palestinians. But it is evident that the Christian community is being crushed in the mill of the bitter Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There are recent and very troubling indications that this decline will be exacerbated and accelerated by actions of the Israeli government and the ascendancy of Islamic fundamentalism. Jerusalem is of universal and sacred importance to Americans – Christians, Jews and Muslims – and the rapid decline of Christian Jerusalem not only jeopardizes strategic American interests in the city, but values cherished and shared by Americans of all faiths.

Committee staff delegations have been unable to understand how the currently routed barrier in Jerusalem – which rips asunder the existential poles of Christian belief, Nativity and Resurrection, encloses 200,000 Palestinians on the Jerusalem side of the barrier – will improve the security of Israel's citizens. The fact that the barrier is to be lined with settlements discloses political goals irreversible in nature, contrary to Israel's declarations. These developments conflict with President Bush's repeated statements that the barrier being erected by Israel should be a security rather than a political barrier.

Another recent development, no less dire, has received little attention so far. With the active and tacit support of elements within the Israeli government, the fundamentalist Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem have been establishing a stranglehold over the Old City and its adjacent neighborhoods. These extremist settlers – who intend to establish their own brand of Jewish exclusivity over Jerusalem, who have Messianic aspirations on the Temple Mount, and who are ideologically committed to derailing any political process – have resumed intensive settlement activities in the Christian and Muslim quarters of the Old City. They have recently expanded their activities to other areas sacred to Christians such as the Mount of Olives. Many of the historic and archeological sites in and the Old City have been transferred by the Israeli governmental authorities to these extreme settlers. None of this could take place without the active support of certain Israeli government authorities.

The potential impact on American interests is stark indeed. The co-existence of the core narratives of the three monotheistic religions is not only what makes Jerusalem unique, but is also the foundation of the stability of the city, if not the entire region. If the indigenous character and the multicultural aspects of Jerusalem are not preserved, the likelihood of a Palestinian society that is truly pluralistic will be diminished and an important bridge that can help shape the representative institutions necessary in any viable two-state solution will be lost. Establishing physical embodiments of extremism at the volcanic core of the conflict – precisely at the time when fundamentalist Islam is on the rise – threatens to transform a resolvable, negotiable territorial conflict into a religious war with global implications. The stability of Jerusalem impacts vital American interests throughout the region and the world, and this stability is being undermined.

Israeli governments have traditionally treated the complexity of Jerusalem with reverence and responsibility. It would be helpful if the United States Government committed itself to working with the Israeli government to end support for and prevent the establishment of new realities on the ground, which complicate a negotiated solution over Jerusalem, destroy its multicultural identity and constitute an increase in the political volatility of the city.

### ***Israel's Obligation to Ensure Religious Freedom for All***

It is becoming increasingly difficult for Christians and Muslims living in the occupied territories to practice their faith. The security barrier, checkpoints, permit system, and segregated highway system render getting to religious services extremely difficult. In addition, the security barrier cuts through religious properties and impedes access to important holy sites. Consequently the fabric of religious life is being destroyed. The Christians in the area view the security barrier as something that is seriously damaging religious freedom in the Holy Land, impeding their access to important holy sites, and tearing at the social fabric of Christian life by destroying the important linkages between Bethlehem and Jerusalem, resulting in a decreasing Christian presence in both cities.

As a democracy, Israel has a responsibility to protect religious freedom for all inhabitants of the Holy Land. Jerusalem must continue to be shared by the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is important that the United States explicitly express and take measures to reinforce its opposition to any unilateral actions in Jerusalem that have the potential to prejudice the outcome of final status issues and undermine the likelihood of a shared capital between Israel and the future State of Palestine.

### **Conclusion**

The plight and security of the Christian narrative in the Holy Land is complex. By no means does this report intend to explain every detail in its totality. Instead, this report in an honest attempt to record the modern day challenges facing Christian institutions and their communities from the perspective of Christians living in the area. What is understood by many experts and those on the ground is that the continuation of the status quo is creating an untenable situation for the survival of the Christian narrative in the place of its birth. If the ecumenical nature of holy sites are not maintained, it is feared that these sites will become museums for commercial purposes and will no longer be maintained as places of spiritual worship shared by billions across the world. It is critical that measures are taken to safeguard the integrity of the Holy Land and all its inhabitants.

*Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you, and kings will come from you. I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants after you; and I will be their God." Genesis 17*